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Review: The Return of the Past: Postmodernism in British Architecture and Superstructures: The New Architecture, 1960–1990

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Review: *Superstructures: the New Architecture, 1960-1990*; *The Return of the Past: Postmodernism in British Architecture*

The Return of the Past: Postmodernism in British Architecture. Sir John Soane's Museum, London, 16 May 2018-27 August 2018

Superstructures: the New Architecture, 1960-1990. Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts, Norwich, 24 March 2018-2 September 2018

Recent years have seen British architecture of the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s attract growing interest. The buildings of this period are increasingly of an age where they are the subject of proposals for substantial remodelling or demolition, and so some of the key debates in contemporary British architectural conservation are concerned with them. At the same time, historians are increasingly keen to look beyond the *trentes glorieuses* of the post-war British 'Welfare State', i.e. 1945-75, which coincided with the high water-mark of Modern architecture and planning. How were the architectural and urban principles of the previous three decades challenged and refined during the second half of the 1970s and the 1980s? Two complementary exhibitions during summer 2018 explored this question. The first, *The Return of the Past*, showcased the 'postmodern' revival of historic stylistic forms and urban principles. Meanwhile a second exhibition, *Superstructures*, examined so-called 'High Tech' architecture. 'High Tech' celebrated structural engineering and the use of mechanical services, fusing Modernist enthusiasm for contemporary technology and flexible planning with an interest in nineteenth- and twentieth-century engineering accomplishments.

The Return of the Past was curated by Owen Hopkins, who has previously worked on subjects ranging from the work of Nicholas Hawksmoor to that of Alison and Peter Smithson. The exhibition took place at the Soane Museum, London, principally in the museum's two temporary exhibition galleries but beginning in the adjacent Yellow Drawing Room. Here, items from the permanent collection were juxtaposed with those brought in temporarily for the show. One of the giant yellow 'egg cups' from the roofline of Terry Farrell's 1983 TV-am building in London echoed the colour of the room, into which had been brought chairs by Charles Jencks and others, while the painter Carl Laubin's dramatic depiction of Jeremy Dixon and Edward Jones' reworking of the Royal Opera House suggested the relationship between Soane and the painter Joseph Gandy. One had the sense that these objects might have been the sort of thing that Soane himself could have collected, were he still collecting today.

The traditional style of the built-in vitrines in the museum's temporary exhibition galleries gave the rest of the displays a more formal tone. Drawings, models, and texts were arranged according to the designer or architectural practice which had created them: Terry Farrell; CZWG; Dixon and Jones; John Outram; and James Stirling and Michael Wilford. Highlighted projects included Farrell's sensitive 'Comyn Ching' infill development in London (1978-87) and his Thames-side building for the Secret Intelligence Service (1987-94); Dixon and Jones' Royal Opera House redevelopment (1983-99); Outram's water pumping station on the Isle of Dogs (1986-88); Stirling and Wilford's No. 1 Poultry offices (1985-97); and residential projects by CZWG in London's 'Docklands', the redevelopment of which began in the 1980s.

The 'Postmodernism' of the exhibition's sub-title – a term rarely liked by those to whom it is applied – was defined broadly as an interest in history, style, the city, colour, symbolism, and decoration. The exhibition invited an interpretation of Postmodernism as a radical response to the architecture of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s: a search for a contextual approach which would appeal to its users through its historical resonances. The arrangement of the material by architect and the nature of the material – principally drawings and models, rather than photographs – nonetheless implied a relatively traditional view of architectural practice as an 'artistic' matter. Thus, for example, a sequence of drawings showed how the massing of Farrell's Secret Intelligence Service headquarters was developed, while the work of Outram, one of the most original thinkers of this period, was explained through text and images. His unexecuted 1987 proposal for the reconstruction of Bracken House, an office building in London, included a dramatic painting by Carl Laubin which shows not only the forms intended by Outram but also the extent to which they had been inspired by a complex reading of architectural history and theory.

In some ways, this sort of interpretation is not unhelpful, and Outram's work, in particular, can certainly be understood as a rich riposte to banal functionalism. Nonetheless, what other stories might also have been told, perhaps in a larger space? The displays relating to CZWG's 'Cascades' and 'The Circle' residences (1988-89) hinted at wider contexts through the inclusion of sales and publicity material as well as a contemporary article criticising the postmodernism of 'Cascades'. It would have been interesting to know more about the changing social and urban contexts of the period, and the extent to which it should (or shouldn't) be understood in terms of Thatcherite neo-liberalism. A few other questions came to mind. How did publications such as *Architectural Design* shape the broader culture of postmodernism? Could more emphasis have been placed on the work of other designers, especially women such as Joanna van Heyningen or Eldred Evans? How did Postmodernism in south-east England – the location of most of the exhibited projects – relate to developments elsewhere in Britain, or internationally?

The collaborative processes which underpin architectural creation were more in evidence in *Superstructures*, helped, admittedly, by the much more expansive space which this exhibition occupied. Housed in the Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, it was curated by Jane Pavitt of Kingston University, London, and Abraham Thomas of the Renwick Gallery, Washington, D.C.

The Sainsbury Centre is itself a key work of British High Tech architecture. Designed by Foster and Partners and completed in 1978, the main gallery and teaching spaces occupy a vast single space, with a largely prefabricated portal frame (engineered by Anthony Hunt) creating a service zone along its long side walls and below the roof. Sadly the potential for the Sainsbury Centre itself to be an exhibit was partly lost by the inevitable relegation of *Superstructures* to the underground temporary exhibition galleries. Nonetheless, the displays began with a large model and images of the building.

Pavitt and Thomas situated 'High Tech' within a longer 'engineering' tradition. The exhibition began with images of the likes of the Forth (rail) Bridge (1890) and the Crystal Palace (1851), plus chairs by Jean Prouvé, and panels from the post-war Citroen 2CV van (whose corrugated surface neatly echoed the cladding of Sainsbury Centre). Parallels were drawn with Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion car and geodesic domes, plus work by the Metabolists and Archigram. Prefabrication, as explored by the likes of Prouvé and Ernö Goldfinger, was also highlighted as a key influence, as were the Californian 'case study' houses of the 1940s and 1950s.

At the same time, the exhibition's opening displays also related 'High Tech' to the specific context of post-war Britain, suggesting that the social and political anxieties of the Cold War were nonetheless tempered by an optimistic view of technology. The Dome of Discovery and 'Skylon' sculpture at the 1951 Festival of Britain were created by architects and engineers to with a consciously 'futuristic' image: the 'Skylon', for example, was a dramatic steel tensegrity structure. Later, the belief that modern science and engineering would catalyse the development of Britain on the world stage was a keynote of the 1960s Labour governments of Harold Wilson, who referred to the 'white heat' of the 'technological revolution' in which a new Britain could be forged. Growing affluence, meanwhile, promoted technology in the home. Yet, as Pavitt and Thomas showed, for some architects and critics (notably Reyner Banham), the recent Modern Movement seemed to have failed to keep up. The technological promise of modernity, so important to some in earlier decades, seemed to have been sidelined. 'High Tech' would foreground this promise once more.

In the main part of the exhibition, the displays showed how 'High Tech' ideas were explored in a range of typological contexts. The majority of the projects on display came from the offices of Norman Foster, Richard Rogers, Nicholas Grimshaw, and

Michael and Patty Hopkins, with, in each case, the name of the engineer in each project also being given. The featured projects were largely British but also revealed the impact of these architects internationally. The first section, 'Containers of Culture', showed how buildings for culture and the arts were re-thought on High Tech lines. Drawings and models illustrated projects including Cedric Price and Joan Littlewood's unbuilt 'Fun Palace' (c. 1962), Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano's Pompidou Centre (1977), Rogers' unbuilt proposal for the extension of the National Gallery in London (1983), and Norman Foster's Carré d'Art, Nîmes (1993). Here a potentially radical social agenda was especially clear: these projects were conceived as accessible, flexible, democratic institutions rather than cultural monoliths of a more traditional, weighty kind.

The reforming theme was continued in the next section of the exhibition, entitled 'Factories and Supersheds'. Projects discussed here included the pioneering Reliance Controls Factory, Swindon, by Team 4 (Norman and Wendy Foster, Richard and Su Rogers, 1966). 'High Tech' buildings for the electronics and motor industries provides a new, 'clean' image of the factory whilst also re-shaping the workplace through the use of open planning and shared facilities to by break down employment hierarchies. Subsequent sections of the exhibition showed the application of 'High Tech' ideas to office buildings, transport infrastructure, shopping, and the home. The latter was compellingly presented by means of a full-scale model of part of Michael and Patty Hopkins' house in Hampstead (1976).

The strength of *Superstructures* lay in its focus not on the individual designer or engineer but rather on underlying principles and their application. What emerged was the idea of 'High Tech' as both an ethos and a style. Sometimes it used 'off the shelf' components in a relatively 'low tech' way; in other cases, innovative solutions were devised or borrowed from other industries. The typological organization of the exhibition allowed easy comparison; the use of models – many never before seen in public – was especially welcome. Inevitably, one might quibble with certain aspects of the presentation. For example, Banham's influence is much discussed in the book which accompanies the exhibition, but, like that of Archigram, seemed to be less evident in the displays themselves.

To conclude: these two exhibitions made helpful contributions to the emerging history of architecture in Britain and by UK-based practices since 1970. They revealed the exceptional creativity of the featured designers and their collaborators in this period. The emphasis in both exhibitions on radical intentions was welcome, suggesting a useful prism through which to think more broadly about this period, in ways which go beyond hermetic stylistic categories. The task for historians now is to develop these insights. Much remains to be done if architectural historians are to 'historicise' the decade in the way that colleagues in political and social history are

already doing,¹ especially if we wish to take an inclusive view which looks not only at a few 'star' figures but also the realities of practice across Britain and beyond.

¹ E.g. Stephen Brooke, 'Living in "New Times": Historicizing 1980s Britain', *Historical Compass*, 12 (2014), 20–32.